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## V.—A SURVEY OF THE LITERATURE ON WORDSWORTH.

At the present time, when the world is too much with us, many reasons might be urged for a wider and deeper attention to the study of Wordsworth. We must content ourselves here with a single, obvious reason, easily grasped. The two accredited leaders of English criticism in the nineteenth century, Coleridge and Matthew Arnold, ranked Wordsworth among the five greatest English poets, his compeers being, in their opinion, Chaucer, Spenser, Shakespeare, and Milton.<sup>1</sup> A third critic, no mean one, namely Wordsworth himself, held substantially the same belief, viewing the grounds of his belief as objectively as he could. It is well for everybody, now and then, to regard some matters in a broad perspective.

The attention already paid to Wordsworth has, indeed, been greater than the uninitiated might suppose; but it has not been generally guided by fundamental considerations, or by such a survey of the field as, in spite of some natural reluctance, I now venture to report. My purpose is, first, to indicate on broad lines what has been accomplished thus far in the study of Wordsworth, in order, second, to determine what ought to be done in the future. The necessity of being brief, and the effort not to be obscure, will doubtless render me more dogmatic than one would ordinarily like to appear.

The most complete collection of Wordsworthiana in this country is that in the library of Mrs. Henry A. St. John at

<sup>1</sup>See the general consensus of opinion among the more important authors cited by Karl Bömig in his dissertation (Leipzig, 1906), *William Wordsworth im Urtheile seiner Zeit*.

Ithaca, N. Y.; it consists of approximately eleven hundred volumes, and somewhat less than two hundred articles in periodicals. On the basis of this, one may estimate that the existent literature by and about Wordsworth would make a bibliography of not less than fifteen hundred titles. For comparison we may note that the very thorough *Bibliography of Coleridge* by Dr. J. L. Haney contains about nine hundred entries, exclusive of marginalia, and inclusive of numerous school editions of the *Ancient Mariner* occasioned by the accident of our college entrance requirements. Roughly considered, the amount of material on Wordsworth which could not be discarded is perhaps double that on Coleridge. We can notice, of course, only a few even of the works that are indispensable.

Out of the mass of Wordsworthian literature, a brief survey will naturally light first upon the most important texts of Wordsworth's works, especially of his poetical works; next upon standard biographies of Wordsworth, if there be any; finally upon interpretations and criticisms of Wordsworth, so far as these are separable from biography.

On the text of Wordsworth's poems practically nothing remains to be done. The definitive text, though the fact is not commonly known, is that edited in 1895 by Mr. Thomas Hutchinson, and since issued without corrigenda in a volume of the well-known Oxford Edition of the English poets. This improves, of course, upon the prior Aldine text of Professor Dowden, though the Aldine Edition is otherwise the best on account of Dowden's commentary. Professor Knight's Eversley Edition, 1896, derives some importance from its attempt to offer Wordsworth's poems in chronological arrangement. Unfortunately, with the imperfect data thus far available, such an effort is necessarily tentative; and, still more unfortunately, Knight in this, his second attempt, neglected many strictures passed

upon his earlier Edinburgh Edition, so that only his occasional citation from documents to which other people are denied access makes his later edition of value to scholars. The prospective edition by Mr. Nowell Smith, which is said to be under way, will have to be reckoned with whenever it shall appear, but rather on account of accessory information about Wordsworth's literary sources than because of any probable superiority over Mr. Hutchinson's edition in point of a faithful text.

Of Wordsworth's prose works there have been two supposedly complete editions, that by Grosart in 1876, and that by Knight in the Eversley Series of 1896. Grosart's three volumes served their day. Knight's two, strangely enough, were passed over by the reviewers, though in plan and annotation they are hardly less vulnerable than the rest of the good professor's achievements as an editor. There is, however, no crying need of a new issue of Wordsworth's prose, save in the case of his letters.

The latter need, it is true, Professor Knight is even now aiming to satisfy, and we shall have—before long, let us hope—a substantial collection of Wordsworth's correspondence from the press of Messrs. Ginn and Company, a monument to the unselfishness of an American publisher. This collection will be indispensable to scholars—I would not for a moment underrate the editor's service—but it will suffer from arbitrary and baffling excisions, and, like the *Journals* of Dorothy Wordsworth, it must sometime be revised by a different hand.<sup>1</sup>

With the mention of letters we verge upon the matter of biography. The correspondence of the Wordsworths al-

<sup>1</sup> The collection has since appeared (*Letters of the Wordsworth Family*, in three volumes, Boston, Ginn); it bears out the description given above.

ready published or soon to be, the *Journals* of the poet's sister, the *Prelude*, the *Memoirs* by the poet's nephew, the *Life* by Knight, the incomparable study of Wordsworth's early years by Legouis, and the researches of Hutchinson, afford an adequate account of Wordsworth's career, at least in an external sense. Indeed, the table of external facts given by Hutchinson in the Oxford Edition of Wordsworth offers as much as is needed in the way of pure chronology. Of biography in a higher sense we may say that Legouis's monograph, humanly speaking, is perfect so far as it goes. In the ordinary sense of biography, Knight's voluminous work, though inaccurate, is still necessary. On the whole, the most trustworthy record of Wordsworth's career in its entirety is the first, by Bishop Wordsworth, the excellent memoirs by Dowden and Myers not excepted. In the highest sense, no one is yet in a position to deal with the poet's life in its broadest relations, for want of numberless preliminary investigations. But with literary biography, if we may coin the term, we begin to invade another field. With the poet not merely in his own development, and not merely in relation to his own age, but in relation to other ages and literatures as well, we reach the province of interpretation and criticism, or, in a word, simply criticism.

The salient trait in the mass of critical literature on Wordsworth is its tone of normal health. The eminent sanity of his genius, though it could not secure him against the pens of the hasty and ill-taught, has saved the poet from the more sickly sort of sentimentalists. The morbid gain strength in writing about him. This is not all. The amount of Wordsworthian criticism that is positively well done is so large that of his abler exponents not a tithe may here be even named. Omitting Coleridge and Lamb, Arnold and Ruskin, Henry Reed, William Minto, R. H.

Hutton, and coming down to the present, we find at the head of Wordsworthian students three in particular that must not go unmentioned, Legouis, Hutchinson, and Dowden. Of these, it may be said, Hutchinson knows most about the poet in and for himself; Dowden, from his rich experience in other fields, has a better perspective of Wordsworth with reference to literature as a whole; and Legouis, thanks to his scholarly French training, has written the truest single book about Wordsworth yet produced. He has known how to limit his treatment in such a way as to be both specific and general. This work by Legouis, the interpretation of the *Prelude* already referred to, is, like Dowden's Introduction in his volume of selections published by Ginn, oftener consulted than are the invaluable criticisms of Hutchinson, which are contained in his reprints of *Lyrical Ballads* and the *Poems* of 1807, or scattered through the files of the *Academy* and the *Athenæum*, very often in unsigned reviews.

In the main, such extant interpretation and criticism of Wordsworth as bids fair to endure the test of time has confined itself to the elucidation of his topography in the Lake District, and the circumstances under which he wrote particular poems; to his function as a nature-poet, after a conception of nature narrower than the Aristotelian, together with his relation to immediate precursors in England; and, finally, to his connection with the events and motive forces of the French Revolution. It is in the last named field that the most stimulating work has been done, by Legouis, Dowden, and, more recently, Cestre.

But Wordsworth is a right English poet. Repaying as the study has been that has linked him with Rousseau and Beaupuy, we must not forget that as a literary artist he nourished his soul chiefly upon Chaucer, Spenser, Shakespeare, Milton, and the classics. In his literary history the

first significant fact is this, recorded by his nephew: 'his father set him very early to learn portions of the best English poets by heart, so that at an early age he could repeat large portions of Shakespeare, Milton, and Spenser.' Later on, when, as Wordsworth says, he took up 'the profession of a poet for life,' these three and Chaucer became, among English models, the almost exclusive objects of his analysis and conscious emulation. 'These I must study, and equal *if I could*; and I need not think of the rest.' One other principle of emphasis he gives us, for our guidance in approaching him, when he tells his nephew: 'Remember, first read the ancient classical authors; *then* come to us; and you will be able to judge for yourself which of us is worth reading.'

For these and other reasons I proceed to indicate a cluster of problems which must be worked out systematically, and to a conclusion, before Wordsworth can be thoroughly appreciated, and which have hitherto been handled by his various devotees either casually or not at all.

I. Corresponding to the general need of intensive studies on the relation of our greatest poets one to another, for example, of Spenser to Chaucer, and of Milton to both, there is a need of special and complete investigations into the debt which Wordsworth owes to Chaucer, Spenser, Shakespeare, and Milton, severally. In that ideal fabric which English scholarship is rearing for the edification of posterity, our age might at least begin to lay more of the great cross-beams.

II. Similarly, Wordsworth's debt to the classics ought to be subjected to a thoroughgoing examination by several persons working in harmony. Such persons will take their cue from the able investigations carried on under the direction of Professor Cook for Spenser, Shakespeare, and, notably, Milton. In Wordsworth's case this field will

prove more fertile than the traditional platitudes about *Laodamia* and *Intimations of Immortality* would lead one to suspect, and even richer, I think, than one will be likely to gather from the forthcoming annotations of Mr. Nowell Smith. Wordsworth's quotations from the Latin are, after all, of much less account than his Grecian clearness of atmosphere and outline.

III. The traditional mist about Wordsworth's attitude toward organized and special science ought also to be dissolved, first, by some one who, having grounded himself in the history of criticism, shall trace the genesis and growth of the Wordsworthian theory or science of literature, and its progressive application to the poet's own life and work, and shall adequately demonstrate in how far this theory was original. Mr. Nowell Smith has done real service by making Wordsworth's critical writings accessible in one volume, yet it is more or less typical of all efforts in this line that Mr. Smith should have neglected the obvious sources of some of Wordsworth's critical ideas. For example, no heed has been given to the fact that whereas in 1800 Wordsworth was acquainted with Aristotle's *Poetics* only at second hand, that is through conversation with Coleridge, he probably read the Greek text afterward for himself.<sup>1</sup>

IV. Nor should his debt to other and ancillary sciences be slighted. In a coming issue of *Modern Language Notes* I hope to make evident the wise dependence of this nature-poet upon the rapidly developing geography of his day, as a mark of his attention to the whole round of scientific observation.<sup>2</sup> But I shall be able to draw only a feeble

<sup>1</sup> Compare *Wordsworth's Literary Criticism*, ed. Nowell Smith, pp. 25, 153, 254.

<sup>2</sup> The article has since appeared (*Mod. Lang. Notes*, March, April, 1907).



furrow in an extensive plain. In no great poet—I repeat the assertion earnestly—in no great poet have we more abundant and suitable material by which to lay bare that indissoluble bond between poetry and science which so easily escapes the layman; for no other poet, as it seems to me, has manifested so variedly and so explicitly the brotherhood of theory and practice. What other poet has left us a genetic psychology of the literary temperament comparable in faithfulness and delicacy to the *Prelude*?

V. It is strange that, if the systematic study of Wordsworth has not been impelled to go back as far as Milton, it should not at least bound forward from the French Revolution and consider Wordsworth comprehensively in the light of his subsequent influence. By his fruits we shall know him. Out of the treasure of Wordsworthian scholarship, therefore, let some regenerated scribe bring forth things new as well as old. Let him show, if only by an accumulation of references, what were the obligations to this great spirit, of Byron, De Quincey, Tennyson, Ruskin, Mill, Matthew Arnold, Gladstone. Or, turning to America, let him tell us what Wordsworth has given to Emerson in *May Day*, to Bryant in *Thanatopsis*, and to Thoreau in *Walden*. Doubtless all American nature-poetry is tinctured with the influence of Rousseau; and the spirit of Jean Jacques, or the better spirit that has operated through him, might not always be easily distinguished from the leaven of Wordsworth. Here is an alluring theme for the literary historian who can make up his mind whether an ant-hill is more ‘natural’ than a populous town, and whether romantic solitude is nobler than social life in the *Civitas Dei*. Yet in his pursuit of the nature cult, the student had better consult Lucretius and Virgil and Wordsworth first, and he will be able to judge for himself ‘which of us is worth reading.’

VI. But for all Wordsworthian studies, complex or simple, there is one piece of apparatus sadly lacking. Wordsworth's poems, though they are to be had in well-nigh impeccable texts, offer unusual difficulties when it comes to systematic reference, and would do so even were they arranged in a sequence more convenient than any now feasible. Several of the questions I have mooted demand for their solution not merely a scholar of the widest erudition, the maturest taste, the firmest and most philosophic training. They demand every sort of mechanical help toward accurate and definitive treatment. Upon the ideal scholar of the future, plain industry and honest thoroughness to-day can confer an inestimable service by the preparation of a complete concordance to Wordsworth's poetry. The want of a concordance is so imperative that, I believe, true admiration and love for the poet, and an unselfish hope for his more effectual popularization in the future, will for the time being cause us to defer all plans of a less humble kind, however enticing, and to strain every nerve in the attainment of this fundamental work of reference. Accordingly, I have pleasure in announcing that my friend Professor Clark S. Northup and myself have agreed to edit such a concordance, and have taken initiatory steps toward its production, and that so soon as our expectation that it will be published becomes assured, we shall proceed in the undertaking with the utmost diligence.

LANE COOPER.